

FINAL

**STATEMENT OF
RON STEWART DEPUTY CHIEF
FOREST SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

**Before the
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives**

**Concerning the Forest Service
Revised Road Policy
March 4, 1999**

MADAM CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the status of the Forest Service revised road policy. I am Ron Stewart, Deputy Chief for Programs and Legislation for the USDA Forest Service, and I am accompanied by Thomas L. Mills, Director of the Pacific Northwest Research Station.

Forest roads are an essential part of the transportation system in many rural parts of the country. They help to meet the recreation demands while providing economic opportunities from the National Forest System. The benefits of forest roads are many, but roads also create many ecological impacts on our watersheds. As the Natural Resource Agenda emphasizes, the Forest Service needs to maintain a road system to provide public access while reducing and reversing their environmental effects. The revised road policy is an essential part in implementing the agenda.

Our progress in developing the revised road policy can be outlined in three key steps:

First, the Forest Service implemented a temporary suspension to provide a time-out from building new roads into unroaded areas where costs of construction are usually high and values at risk are high, as well. This temporary suspension went into effect on March 1, 1999, and will expire upon the adoption of the revised road management policy or 18 months, whichever is sooner.

Second, the Forest Service is developing a road analysis procedure. This procedure will assist managers in using the best science to decide where, when, or if to build new roads in unroaded as well as roaded areas. The procedure will be available in 1999.

Third, the Forest Service is developing new regulations and direction to provide an environmentally sound road system that meets the needs of local people. The revised road policy is scheduled to be completed by fall of 2000.

I would like to take a moment to expand on each of these steps.

TEMPORARY SUSPENSION

The temporary suspension is necessary to allow us to protect socially important and ecologically valuable unroaded areas while we develop a protective and responsible revised road policy.

The potentially damaging ecological effects of a first entry into an unroaded area are often proportionately greater than the effects of similar construction or reconstruction in an already roaded area. The temporary suspension will provide time to refocus attention on the larger issues of public use, demand, expectation, and funding surrounding the National Forest road system.

The current road system developed to meet the transportation needs of the 1960's and 1970's does not reflect the needs of today. Timber hauling has decreased over time while recreation traffic has grown dramatically. Today, there are over 1,706,000 recreation vehicles per day on forest roads and 15,000 timber harvest vehicles per day. Timber traffic represents less than one percent of all forest road use.

Road management is a long-term financial commitment; as long as a road exists then it must be maintained. The national forest road system has 383,000 miles of classified roads and 52,000 miles of unclassified roads. Classified roads are roads constructed or maintained for long-term highway vehicle use. Unclassified roads are temporary roads or short-term roads associated with fire suppression, timber harvest and oil, gas or mineral activities as well as travelways resulting from off-road vehicle use.

Based on information we are preparing for a report to Congress on Forest Service maintenance and improvement needs, we estimate that with just the classified roads we have a deferred maintenance and capital improvement needs backlog of \$8.4 billion and growing. Currently we only receive 18 percent of the funding needed to annually maintain roads to planned service, safety and environmental standards. Even with the significant increase in our budget request for FY 2000, funding does not address the annual maintenance needs or begin to address the backlog.

It is fiscally and environmentally irresponsible to continue to build roads when our current road system is in such disrepair and decline. Without adequate funding, the system will continue to decline causing environmental damage and posing human safety risks.

Effects of the Temporary Suspension

Based on the environmental assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact signed on February 2, 1999, the Forest Service anticipates no long-term effects on the production of forest resources as a result of implementing the temporary suspension. However, we did identify and analyze some short-term effects in the environmental assessment and benefit/cost analysis.

The primary tangible effects include:

The policy will suspend approximately 368 miles of construction and reconstruction of roads in unroaded areas. This represents a suspension of 4% of the permanent and temporary road construction and reconstruction within the National Forest road system during the 18-month period.

The suspension in road construction and reconstruction will reduce the potential timber harvest approximately 200 million board feet. This is approximately 3% of the volume offered from National Forest system lands during an 18-month period. However, since National Environmental Policy Act requirements have not been completed on a significant amount of this 200 million board feet, and some forests will be able to shift harvest programs to roaded areas, the actual affected harvest volume could be considerably less than what is estimated.

As an indirect result of the suspension, we estimate a reduction in annual employment nationwide of about 300 direct timber jobs per year over 3 years. To the extent that workers can not find alternative employment, local and county revenues will be decreased. There could also be an annual loss of about \$6 million to local communities from payments-to-states from the 25% fund. These potential losses of employment and revenue may be offset by substitution of timber volume from areas not subject to the suspension and also by utilizing volume already under contract awaiting harvest. Also, the 1998 Supplemental Appropriations Recission Act (Pub. L. 105-174) may, to some extent, compensate for shortfalls in payments-to-states. Section 3006 of this Act provides compensation for loss of revenues that would have been provided to counties if no road moratorium, as described in subsection (a)(2), were implemented or no substitute sales offered as described in subsection (b)(1). In addition, if enacted the Forest Service proposal to stabilize 25% fund payments would mitigate the economic effects on counties and states.

The Forest Service has a wide array of programs to assist communities and we are committed to work with communities to identify and implement assistance programs while the interim rule is in effect

ROAD ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

The second step is the development of the road analysis procedure. This procedure includes:

- a new science-based, multi-scale landscape analysis of ecological, social, and economic aspects of Forest Service road systems;

- a process to help land managers make informed land management decisions about the management of roads, including maintenance, construction in both roaded and unroaded areas, reconstruction, or decommissioning; and

- an expansion and extension of previous roads analysis tools and techniques.

During the last 12 months the Forest Service field tested the draft procedure on six national forests. The draft procedure is now undergoing a rigorous scientific peer and technical review. We expect to have the road analysis procedure available by 1999.

REVISED REGULATIONS AND DIRECTION

The third step is to revise regulations and directions for administration of the Forest Service Transportation System pertaining to roads. The revised road policy will:

update current road regulations and directions to provide the minimum forest road system that best serves the management objectives and public uses of national forests and grasslands;

ensure that the road system provides for safe public use, economically affordable and efficient management, and is environmentally sound;

ensure that road management decisions use a science-based analysis process to fully evaluate benefits and impacts of road systems within both unroaded and already roaded portions of the landscape;

ensure that new road construction does not compromise socially and ecologically important values of unroaded areas; and

ensure that regulations and direction will reflect budget realities.

As a result of the Advanced Notice of Rule Making (ANPR) published in the Federal Register in January 1998, we received a great number of comments on the values of unroaded areas and the proposed revised road policy. We plan to publish the draft policy, including response to the initial comments, in the Federal Register this fall for further public comment. The revised road policy should be finalized by Fall of 2000.

SUMMARY

Madam Chairman, the Forest Service shares your concern for a transportation system that is adequately funded and meets the needs of all Americans.

With the implementation of the temporary suspension and the progress made on the road analysis procedure, we can now complete the new policy that will provide a science-based process enabling us to manage our road system in a manner that reduces environmental impacts and improves habitats and water quality.

This policy is a first step in focusing our limited resources on the roads most in need. We also need your support to fund adequately the reduction of our enormous backlog in road maintenance and reconstruction.

This concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you and Members of the Subcommittee may have.